

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF AN I-MESSAGE

(By Dr. Thomas Gordon)

Have you ever had people confront you by telling you only how they felt--nothing more--such as.

- "I'm upset with you."
- "I'm really disappointed."
- "I am worried."
- "I am unhappy with you."

Such messages leave everyone puzzled and bewildered, so your first response was probably to ask *why* the confronter was upset, disappointed, worried, or unhappy. Or perhaps you responded with "What did I do?" The point is that telling a person only how you *feel* is an incomplete confrontation; it contains only one of the three components of a complete I-message: (1) brief description of the *behavior* you find unacceptable, (2) your honest *feelings* and (3) the tangible and concrete *effect* of the behavior on you (the consequences).

Obviously, to eliminate the necessity for the question, "What did I do?" you need to inform the person exactly what *behavior* you find unacceptable. Secondly, a direct and honest *expression of your feelings* is usually required in order to underscore the degree of emotional impact which the unacceptable behavior had on you. Lastly, you need to include the *effect* (or consequences) component in order to convince the person that you really have a logical, rational reason for wanting a behavior change (that your life is actually affected in some tangible and concrete way).

When people learn how to send I-messages, they find it extremely useful to remember this I-message formula: BEHAVIOR + FEELINGS + EFFECTS, not necessarily in that order.

During the initial phase of learning to send complete three-part I-messages you will feel self-conscious and mechanical. Gradually, with practice, they will come much more naturally and require less deliberate thought. But practice is required, as with almost any new skill: learning a new golf swing or tennis stroke, sailing a boat, learning to ski, or operating a calculator.

In the following example, taken from an interview with a plant manager, you will see a good three-part I-message and also get a feel for the changed attitudes of the supervisor towards his people:

"I have an old employee who thinks all the time he can remember numbers. His work is in the storeroom, and he feels he has it all stored up here in his memory. And his memory isn't that good, 'cause he consistently comes up with wrong numbers--more so than the new employees who don't trust their memory and look up and check and write down the right numbers. By bringing him in and setting him down, I think I have got the problem across to him. And it has helped some. I told him, 'we've got a problem out

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there because you've gotten quite a few wrong tickets, and I'm really concerned about the background. And I said, 'As I grow older my memory isn't as good.' Now I didn't accuse him that his memory was flipping, and I think I brought it out in a roundabout way

without putting him on the defensive. Well, he agreed that we had a problem and that it caused a lot of errors in our inventory. And it helped some, yes. I think he left with a better feeling, a better taste in his mouth than if I had given him the old 'Better straighten up and fly right or else' approach, you know. I think I don't underestimate the intelligence of people under me. That's on fallacy of management—they underplay or underrate people. I'll admit I had a little of that when I first became foreman, but now I realize that they actually are intelligent people.... I think anytime you can talk to someone in a way that doesn't downgrade him, you keep his respect. I feel he responds a hell of a lot better than when you say, 'I'm your boss and you do this or that.' If you can get to him in a way that he feels you're on a man-to-man basis and you've got a problem and you're only trying to solve it."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SEND I-MESSAGES?

When you set out to influence someone to change by sending an I-message, a number of things can happen. Your initial message is only the first step in the change process, but it is important because it is the tone for what may come later. For this discussion, I will sometimes use the terms "changer" and "changee."

Who Owns the Problem?

It is essential that you keep in mind the fundamental concept of "problem ownership." When you decided to try to change another person whose behavior is interfering with your getting your needs met, *you* own the problem, not the changee. The changee does not have a problem; indeed, he is getting *his* needs met by doing the very thing that causes you not to get *your* needs met. You can't blame a person for meeting his needs--it's the way people function. So don't be upset with *the person* whose behavior causes you a problem, although you are perfectly justified in being upset with *the fact* that you have a problem. This is the attitude that gets communicated by your non-blaming I-message, as opposed to a blaming you-message.

The Changee Is in the Driver's Seat

Although you assume responsibility for confronting the changee with the fact that you have a problem, in the final analysis it is the changee who ultimately must make the decision whether to change or not. The "locus of responsibility" resides in the changee. Because you have the problem, you are in fact *dependent on the changee*. Again, the I-message effectively and accurately communicates this attitude; it is a statement of your problem but does not tell the changee he must change or how he must change. Again I-messages are *appeals for help*, and this accounts for their often amazing potency. Most people respond better to honest appeals for help than to demands, threats, solutions, or lectures.

The Importance of "Shifting Gears"

Although I-messages are more likely to influence others to change than You-messages, still it is a fact that being confronted with the prospect of having to change is often disturbing to the changee. A common response of the changee to your I-message is to become anxious, upset, defensive, hurt, apologetic, or resistive, as in the following two examples:

1. Changer: I was really upset when I found several critical errors in your report because it made me look foolish at the board meeting where I presented the report.

Change: Well, you wanted it in such a hurry I did not have time to double-check all my calculations.

2. Changer: When I hear complaints from patients that you are not answering their call light immediately, I get upset because I would hate to be held responsible for something bad happening to one of our patients.

Change: I can't be in two places at the same time and besides some of our patients call us for things they can do themselves.

In both situations, even your perfectly good I-message provoked defensiveness and some degree of hostility. Your I-message caused the changee a problem. Not at all unusual--people rarely like to be told their behavior is unacceptable, no matter how it is worded. When people resist changing, it is generally useless to keep hammering at them with subsequent I-messages; what is called for at such times is a quick shift to Active Listening. In these two situations the shift might sound something like:

1. Changer: You were under such a time bind, you felt you couldn't take the time to check your figures, is that right?
2. Changer: You mean you can't see the call light when you're in another patient's room. And I also gather you get irritated when patients call you to do things for them they could do themselves.

This shifting from a sending posture to a listening posture, which in our L.E.T. course is called "shifting gears," serves several extremely important functions in confronting situations.

1. It communicates that the changer has understood and accepted (not agreed with, of course) the changee's position--his or her feelings, defenses, and reasons. This greatly increases the changee's willingness to understand and accept the changer's position. ("He listened to me, now I'll listen to him.")
2. It helps dissipate the changee's emotional response (hurt, embarrassment, anger, regret), paving the way for possible change or, as I shall later describe, mutual problem-solving.
3. It results, not infrequently, in a change in the *changer's* attitude from previously finding the other's behavior unacceptable to later seeing it as acceptable. ("Oh, I now see why you miss some of the patient's call lights--you can't see them.")

After the changer has shifted gears to Active Listening, it might be appropriate to repeat the original I-message or send a modified one. ("I understand why you didn't recheck your calculations, but I still can't accept reports with incorrect figures.")

Here is an example of effective gear shifting, reported by a supervisor who previously found it hard to confront people:

"I found it very difficult at first—actually using I-messages and then switching to Active Listening. Because I didn't like people to become very hostile with me. But it worked out very well one day at work. A girl came into my office when I was really busy working; I was under a lot of pressure. And this person likes to come in and sit and talk. If it hadn't been for L.E.T. and the Active Listening I probably

never would have known how to handle the situation. So she came in, she sat down, and I delivered her an I-message: 'When you come into my office to sit down and talk, I can't get my work done and that really upsets me.' And so her automatic response was defensive and she in turn said, 'Well, what I wanted to talk about is also of concern to you.' And I kept above the emotion level and actively listened to her: 'Sounds like you're upset with me?' Yes, she was, she said. And I said, 'You feel hurt by my not wanting to listen to this issue right now.' And she said, 'Yes, I am hurt. I know you're busy, but surely you've got enough time for me.' And we came to the solution that we'd meet for lunch. So that worked out very well . . . I guess I felt really good because this was the first time I had used an I-message in the work environment and been able to handle the defensiveness not as a direct slam on myself. It's a frightening thing to have to confront somebody with an issue. But once you start to realize that people normally will get defensive and that they can be talked into backing down by listening--I started to feel confident that I could deliver an I-message and then dwell on the other person's feeling, not my own."

Having learned in the L.E.T. class that people do frequently respond with defensiveness when confronted, this supervisor was able to overcome her fear of confrontation.